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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8498
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 6003
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 2885
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM 0167
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1236
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1411
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0569
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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SUBJECT: ERITREA MOVES TROOPS AND ARMOR INTO THE TSZ

REF: A) DAO ASMARA ER 161416Z OCT 06 IIR 6 908 0026
07 B) ADDIS 2793

Classified By: Amb. Scott H. DeLisi for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) On the morning of October 16, the GSE moved troops, tanks and heavy equipment transporters into the Western Sector of the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ). UNMEE reported at a meeting of the P5 representatives that approximately 1000 troops with 10 tanks had crossed the TSZ checkpoint at Maeleba south of Tesseney near the Sudan border. Additionally, at the TSZ checkpoint at Kerkesha, approximately 500 troops with 5 tanks entered the TSZ stopping about 15 kilometers from the border on the route to Badme. (Ref A and B). UNMEE SRSG Azouz Ennifar characterized the Eritrean action as a clear violation of the Algiers Accord and immediately sought a meeting with the GSE. Eritrea's Commissioner to UNMEE, Col. Zacharias Ogbagaber, ultimately met with Ennifar on October 16 but offered no substantive response to his questions nor an explanation of the rationale for the GSE movement into the TSZ. Zacharias declined to meet with Embassy officers when contacted on October 17. As of 15:00 October 17, Post had heard reports that the number of tanks could have increased to as high as 50 and the number of troops to 5000 but these reports remain unconfirmed.

¶2. (U) The public Eritrean response thus far has been limited. Yemane Ghebremeskel of the Office of the President, claimed in a Reuters article published the morning of October 17 that the troops were in the area to do development projects. Yemane told Reuters, &We have a broad range of development projects in the area. What is the fuss about? This is sovereign Eritrean territory and this is perfectly understandable.⁸ Information Minister Ali Abdu reportedly told AFP that the troops had entered the TSZ to &harvest crops⁸ as they do every year at this time. He maintained that the tanks were there because when soldiers move they &have to take their equipment.⁸

¶3. (C) During the October 16 movement into the TSZ, the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) took control of the checkpoint at Maeleba from the UNMEE Jordanian troops who patrol the region and directed them to return to their camp. At the Kerkesha checkpoint, the UNMEE Jordanian troops were not challenged and maintained control of the checkpoint. The EDF

reportedly also stopped an UNMEE observer team traveling from Shambiko to Kerkesha and ordered them to return to the team site. An UNMEE fuel truck was also ordered to turn around.
(Ref A)

¶4. (C) Comment: Although it is true that the GSE routinely has sent troops into the TSZ to assist with the harvest their actions have never been so blatant. Nor have the troops in past brought tanks and artillery pieces with them for harvesting exercises. Assuming that harvesting is not the true intent, however, the timing of the GSE action, coming on the heels of the just-concluded mediation of the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement, seems to carelessly squander any international goodwill that the GSE may have garnered from its successful role in that effort. Meanwhile, the troop movement is too small to be, by itself, considered an offensive threat. It is, however, large enough to be provocative and unhelpful in a broader regional context.

¶5. (C) Comment continued. The prevailing assessment locally is that the GSE may be acting preemptively to secure key portions of the TSZ along the border in advance of a possible UNMEE withdrawal (either following the next UNSC mandate review or as the result of a GSE expulsion order). At the same time, we are mindful that in the past months the GSE has continued its efforts to reshape the regional political dynamic. In that context, the GSE action in the TSZ is also likely intended to complicate the regional equation for Ethiopia, if Ethiopia is indeed contemplating a broader military engagement in Somalia. Although we do not, at this point, see evidence that Eritrea would take advantage of Ethiopian preoccupation with Somalia to launch a strike across the disputed border, the possibility remains an unspoken threat that the GSE hopes will leave Ethiopia uncertain about GSE intentions. Meanwhile, this military posturing in the TSZ when coupled with Eritrea's increased engagement in Sudan, its support for the CIC in Somalia, and its linkages to OLF and ONLF separatists, reminds all of Eritrea's neighbors that it is increasingly a force in the region and cannot be ignored. End Comment.

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